

“The youth revolts . . . have shown that while regimes might be able to play the Islamic radicalism and sectarianism cards to bolster their hold on power in the short term, this is a failing strategy in the long run.”

## Propaganda and Power in the Middle East

EMILE NAKHLEH

**T**he revolutionary spirit of reform that was unleashed in late 2010 and early 2011 has captured the imagination of tens of millions of Arabs, young and old. Never before have so many, with such perseverance and peacefulness, demanded the dismantling of their corrupt, repressive, and autocratic governments. Despite convulsions in several Arab states, the horrible violence in Syria, and serious human rights violations in Gulf Arab countries, the world is witnessing the birth of a new Middle East. A new generation—youthful, sophisticated, inclusive, nonsectarian, and non-ideological—is asserting that Arab authoritarianism is no longer acceptable, and the authoritarian narrative has run its course.

### Soft Power Revisited

Third in a series

In every “Arab Spring” country, the popular revolts started peacefully, but regimes forced the protest movements to turn to violence. Dictators have used religious and ethnic sectarianism to contain, divide, or defeat pro-reform movements. When those tactics fail, they have attempted to link opposition movements to foreign-armed terrorist groups, foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations, or foreign embassies. Bahraini and Saudi Sunni ruling families have accused Iran of directing the Shiite opposition groups in their countries. In Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen, the regimes’ divisive methods in early 2011—whether soft or harsh—failed, resulting in their ouster. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad’s regime has remained defiant because he and his minority Alawite ruling

elite view the struggle against rebels as an existential fight, which precludes power sharing with the opposition. The international uproar over the use of poisonous gas on August 21, 2013, which killed at least 1,400 men, women, and children, has not deterred Assad from continuing his bloody crackdown against the opposition.

The popular revolts and the ouster of well-entrenched dictators have shaken the region and forced autocratic regimes that are still standing to scramble for new strategies to bolster their control and legitimacy at home and internationally. Violent regimes like Syria and human rights violators like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have severely curtailed their media at home and detained hundreds of opponents. But they also have courted and manipulated foreign media in an attempt to spread the implausible argument that their authoritarianism offers a guarantee of regional stability and a bulwark against international terrorism. These strategies aimed at persuasion involve well-financed public relations campaigns and massive propaganda through state-controlled media, as well as efforts to buy off dissent at home.

Part of these regimes’ “soft power” strategy has been to attract Western businesspeople and investors through lucrative deals and job offers to former diplomats. Bahrain, for example, has urged such investors and high-level consultants to spread the word that King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa’s government has quelled the revolt and that the remaining dissidents are no more than a few disgruntled citizens engaged in terrorist activities. Bahraini leaders, especially the king, the crown prince, and the prime minister, are constantly repeating the same talking points to foreign officials, insisting that Bahrain is stable and safe. But this message has not really resonated internationally, as evidenced by a recent declaration condemning human rights abuses in Bahrain.

---

EMILE NAKHLEH, a research professor at the University of New Mexico, is the former director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis program at the US Central Intelligence Agency and the author of *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America’s Relations with the Muslim World* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

The declaration was signed by 47 nations, including the United States and other Western countries.

Within the region, regimes' use of soft power strategies—that is, strategies aimed at attracting, persuading, or co-opting, rather than coercing—has relied on the divisive manipulation of three aspects of Arab identity: religious identity (for example, Sunnis against Shiites in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, regime Islamism against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and orthodox Sunni Islam in Sunni Arab states against Shiites in Iran and Syria); nationalist identity (for example, national sovereignty against foreign state and non-state actors and their domestic supporters); and cultural traditions (for example, a rejection of globalization, gender equality, pluralistic politics, and so-called permissive social mores that spread on new social media, which regimes consider “un-Islamic”).

As the self-proclaimed guardian of Islam's holiest Sunni shrines in Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia has used proselytization to preach its Wahhabi Salafist religious ideology across the Muslim world. This intolerant ideology denigrates other Muslim groups that do not subscribe to the Saudi version of the faith, especially the Shiites, long considered by many Wahhabis and Salafists as “apostates” or “unbelievers.” The kingdom has also used its oil wealth to finance a variety of economic projects in Muslim countries in Africa and Asia through Islamic charities and organizations, such as the Muslim World League and the International Islamic Relief Organization. (In recent years, the Saudi government has stopped supporting some of these organizations, including al-Haramayn and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth.)

The military coup that ousted Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, and the dismantling of that country's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) government and parliamentary majority in July 2013 are vivid examples of how the military and remnants of the old regime have undermined the democratic transition in the Arab world's most populous country. But the military has not relied on force alone. The Egyptian regime continuously employs soft power tools, including new social media, to advance its message and discredit its opponents, especially the MB.

---

*The Egyptian military's efforts to garner support for its coup and campaign against opposition groups have not proved successful.*

---

Having been in power for years, autocratic regimes and the remnants of old regimes have amassed considerable soft power tool kits. Arab potentates in the Gulf Cooperation Council states and the military government in Egypt have banded together to confront their peoples' demands for reform and to crush the unprecedented aspirations of the 2011 Arab revolutions. This coalition of autocrats has cynically exploited Western fears of disorder and extremism to rule with an iron fist in the name of fighting “terrorism.”

The youth revolts, however, have shown that while regimes might be able to play the Islamic radicalism and sectarianism cards to bolster their hold on power in the short term, this is a failing strategy in the long run. Al-Khalifa in Bahrain, Assad in Syria, Saudi Arabia's ruling Al Saud clan, and the military government in Egypt continue to link opposition movements to Islamic radicalism, sectarianism, terrorism, or foreign governments and armed groups—but most of their publics and the outside world no longer find these claims credible.

Scholars maintain that true soft power involves the spread of political values that publics admire or at least view positively. The Arab world's authoritarian regimes, however, employ political propaganda as a negative tool against values of democracy, equality, and power sharing—values that they reject but which their citizens equate with good governance.

## EXCEPTIONAL ARGUMENTS

To better understand soft power in the Middle East, it may help to consider how three governments—in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain—as well as the MB (a non-state actor representing incumbent Arab Islamic political parties) have attempted to use powers of persuasion to boost their positions at home, in the region, and globally.

Sunni Arab autocrats, especially in the Gulf, hope to use soft power and billions of dollars in aid to torpedo post-2011 transitions to democracy, discredit the freely elected MB, and bring back the deep security state. An open political system in which the citizens have a say, the autocrats contend, is messy and chaotic and should not be supported by Western democracies. They have used their oil wealth to “convince” doubting foreigners of their argument.

Indeed, it is disheartening that in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Arab dictators are selling the world on the myth of Arab exceptionalism, meaning Arab publics are not yet ready for democracy. Predecessors of some of these dictators, especially in Egypt and Syria, rejected a similar argument as anti-Arab colonial propaganda when it was presented by “orientalists” and foreign powers in the first half of the twentieth century.

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain continue to claim that Iran is supporting the Shiite majority in Bahrain and Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia in order to undo Sunni rule in both countries. In Egypt, the military junta under General Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi has invoked “terrorism” to justify its violent crackdown against the MB and the former Morsi administration. While using state violence to quell pro-reform revolutions, these states have engaged in clever public relations campaigns to maintain the support of Western countries, especially the United States. The international community’s preoccupation with the Syrian civil war and the Western response to Assad’s use of chemical weapons against civilians have provided the regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain with welcome cover, at least for the time being.

---

*The influence of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia has not benefited from their soft power strategies.*

---

## EGYPT’S STORY

The junta under General Sisi refers to any opponent of the recent military coup as a potential terrorist and an agent of either a foreign country or Al Qaeda. Sisi has advanced this claim to marginalize the MB, criminalize its lawful political activity, and extend the state of emergency and the detention of Morsi and other MB leaders. When the military extended the country’s state of emergency in September, Washington and European capitals objected, but to no avail. The government has also targeted secular liberals, including the Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, for criticizing the regime and Sisi’s budding dictatorship. It has taken the Tahrir Square revolutionaries some time to see the military’s sinister plan for what it is: a plot to defeat democracy and return military autocracy to Egypt.

In an effort to defend the legitimacy of the measures it has taken against the opposition, the military has projected itself as a praetorian guard of the state and of Egyptian sovereignty and dignity. To win Gulf support (and financial assistance),

Sisi presents Egypt as a bulwark against Islamic terrorism. By shoring up the Egyptian economy, he argues, Gulf tribal ruling families would be protecting their own security and regimes. Toward these ends, Sisi has crafted a pitch that emphasizes national identity; national sovereignty versus Islamic nationalism; and the threat of terrorism, which he equates with the MB and its brand of Islamism.

This narrative, though it may be effective in the short run, is in fact fraught with contradictions that could prove problematic for the military. Sisi and his interim government have tried to convince Egyptians that a party working to impose its specific religious interpretation on the larger public was threatening their collective national identity and undermining Egypt’s cultural diversity and pluralism. Sisi’s narrative assumes that Egyptian identity is modern, pluralistic, and inclusive. While deeply rooted in Islam, such an identity is also secular and tolerant of minorities, including women and Coptic Christians.

The Egyptian military pursued a sophisticated public relations campaign to convince the United States that if it did not support Morsi’s removal, the new leadership would turn to Saudi Arabia. The Saudis, angry at US President Barack Obama for “deserting” former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, might even encourage Egypt to scuttle its military-to-military relationship with Washington. Yet the Egyptian military is protective of its long-term relationship with the US military. The career ladder of many flag officers invariably includes a training stint in one of America’s prestigious military academies, which they would not lightly replace with alternative training experience in Saudi, Russian, or Pakistani academies.

The United States has more leverage in Egypt than most pundits believe. Also, while it is in the US national interest to maintain the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, for which Washington has compensated the Egyptian military handsomely, it is also in Egypt’s interest to uphold the treaty. Egypt cannot afford another costly, and most likely losing, war with Israel. The propaganda campaign that the Egyptian military and its Saudi and other Gulf Arab brethren are waging aims at testing Obama’s resolve and strengthening the hand of those in the US policy community who

advocate a gentler approach toward the Sisi military dictatorship. Since the “Iran” and “terrorism” arguments did not sell, the Egyptians and Saudis are now raising the specter of a “new regional alignment” between Riyadh and Moscow, which could peel Cairo away from Washington.

Washington should make it clear to General Sisi that he should put Egypt back on a democratic path, and that he cannot achieve a stable, peaceful, and economically prosperous Egypt without including the MB and its supporters in the political process. The Brotherhood still garners 30 percent of popular support in Egypt, according to recent polls. Like King Farouk, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Mubarak before him, Sisi will not succeed in dismantling the MB, despite detaining its most senior leadership.

### THE SAUDI REARGUARD

The Saudi regime has tarred pro-reform Saudi Shiite activists, most of whom reside in the Eastern Province, and some pro-reform Sunnis from Riyadh and Jidda, with the terrorist brush. The Shiite activists in particular are viewed as surrogates for Iran and as potential insurgents bent on undermining Sunni rule in the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia greatly values its special relationship with Washington. On several occasions since the 1973 oil embargo, but especially since the first Gulf war in 1991, Saudi kings have threatened in meetings with US presidents to sever those ties, but have backed off once cooler heads prevailed. Since Morsi's toppling, the Saudi monarchy has tried to convince Washington to take a stronger stand in support of the Egyptian military. Riyadh has announced it will provide Cairo with whatever aid it needs for its military, and has signaled to Washington that it will pursue closer relations with Moscow. This gentle threat centers on the proposition that the Persian Gulf would soon witness an increase in Russian influence, a diminution of US influence, and an unprecedented realignment of regional powers. The Saudis suggest this would not happen if Washington only renews its support for Arab autocrats and relinquishes its stand in defense of human rights and democracy.

A threat to align with Russia is hardly an exercise in soft power. Indeed, thoughtful analysis of the Saudi posture would indicate that it is no more than propaganda aimed at rattling policy makers and pundits in Washington. And the pitch has little credibility. Riyadh would not want to replace its

## THE JOURNAL OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA

*The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, the flagship publication of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA), is the first peer-reviewed academic journal to include both the entire continent of Africa and the Middle East within its purview—exploring the historic social, economic, and political links between these two regions, as well as the modern challenges they face.

Interdisciplinary in its nature, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* approaches the regions from the perspectives of Middle Eastern and African studies as well as anthropology, economics, history, international law, political science, religion, security studies, women's studies, and other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. It seeks to promote new research to understand better the past and chart more clearly the future of scholarship on the regions.

#### Editor-in-Chief

**Dr. J. Peter Pham**, *Director, Michael S. Ansari Africa Center, Atlantic Council*  
**Email:** [info@asmeascholars.org](mailto:info@asmeascholars.org)

#### Publication Details

Volume 5, 2014  
 3 issues per year  
 ISSN Print 2152-0844  
 ISSN Online 2152-0852

#### 2014 Subscription Rates

Institutional **print** and **online**:  
 US\$247/£150/€198  
 Institutional **online-only**:  
 US\$216/£131/€173  
 Individual **print**:  
 US\$62/£37/€50



To view the journal online, visit:  
[www.tandfonline.com/UJME](http://www.tandfonline.com/UJME)

**Routledge**  
 Taylor & Francis Group

**Taylor & Francis**  
 Attn: Journals Customer Service  
 325 Chestnut Street  
 Philadelphia, PA 19106  
 Tel: (800) 354-1420, press “4”  
 Fax: (215) 625-8914  
[customerservice@taylorandfrancis.com](mailto:customerservice@taylorandfrancis.com)

Visit the Routledge Politics and International Relations site at:  
<http://explore.tandfonline.com/pair>

decades-old, special relationship with a flimsy one with Russia. The Saudis love to talk and threaten, but they would not sacrifice the special access they have had to sitting and former US presidents and to the American business community, no matter how much they disagree with Obama's policies.

When the subject of soft power arises in the Middle East, it usually has to do with concerns about waning US influence in the region. But this is frankly hyperbole, which the record does not support. A few disgruntled Arab autocrats might temporarily shun the Obama administration because of its support for human rights and democratic transitions, but it will not be long before they scramble to improve ties. Their prestige depends on it. They cannot afford to upset the regional balance of power by playing a silly neo-cold war game.

What brings this band of Sunni autocrats together is their visceral hatred for democracy, total mistrust of their peoples, and innate belief in their entitlement to rule. They have waged a ferocious global media campaign telling anyone willing to listen that their peoples are not fit for democracy, that their autocracy guarantees domestic stability and regional security, and that Western interests could be better served by dictatorship. The Saudis have led this charge, using all the soft-power tools at their disposal.

## BAHRAIN SEEKS COVER

Bahrain's al-Khalifa rulers have expanded the definition of terrorism to cover anyone calling for reforms and democratic political participation. A Bahraini who criticizes the regime's policy of repression or Prime Minister Khalifa bin Sulman al-Khalifa's legendary corruption is branded a terrorist or a supporter of terrorism. The regime recently arrested Khalil al-Marzuq, the deputy leader of the Wifaq party, despite his support for peaceful protests and dialogue between the government and the opposition. (The government released al-Marzuq a few days later in response to international pressure.) The Sunni ruling family, especially the prime minister, views with suspicion most Shiite opposition groups, including the recognized Wifaq party.

Also suspect are many doctors, health providers, academics, civil society activists, and journalists. The government recently enacted a law forbidding Bahraini nongovernmental organizations from contacting representatives of foreign governments or international funding entities

without prior permission from the ministry of foreign affairs. If and when such meetings are permitted, a ministry representative must be present. This is on top of 22 repressive amendments that the lower house of the Bahraini parliament passed recently. The amendments call for stripping Bahrainis of their citizenship if they criticize the ruling family, whether on Twitter or in person.

By endearing themselves to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's rulers hope that the kingdom's Sunni Wahhabi anti-Shiite ideology will shield them from reform demands and justify their bloody crackdown on the opposition. They view their warm economic and political relations with some British diplomats in London and in Manama, and their purchases of arms from British companies, as assurance of British tolerance for Bahrain's poor human rights record.

Since Morsi's removal, Bahrain's leaders have strongly supported the Egyptian military's campaign against the MB, but have found themselves as a result in an uncomfortable position. The al-Khalifa regime usually exploits Sunni Islam, of which the Brotherhood is the most visible face, to play the sectarian card against Bahrain's Shiite majority. The ruling family has encouraged its most ultraconservative Sunni supporters to wage a vicious sectarian campaign accusing the Shiites of apostasy. Internationally, they have hid behind a so-called dialogue process with the opposition, which of course is destined to fail because of a lack of official commitment to power sharing.

To present a gentle picture of the government's abysmal human rights record, the ruling family has hired publicists and waged a public relations campaign through traditional means and on new social media. The campaign has failed. Western governments, human rights groups, the European Union, and Western media have recently strongly criticized the regime's human rights violations, including the illegal arrests and sham trials of peaceful protesters. The US State Department on September 19, 2013, issued a statement expressing "concern" about the government's recent restrictions on civil society groups and their ability to freely communicate with foreign governments and international organizations.

A recent twist in the Bahraini regime's propaganda has been to argue that the "Bahraini file" is linked to the "Syrian file," and therefore the Bahraini conflict cannot be resolved until Syria is taken care of. The regime has been trying feverishly to sell this argument to regional and interna-

tional players and to the Bahraini opposition. No such linkage exists; popular demands for reform in Bahrain started in the 1970s. A resolution of the Syrian crisis, whether by war or diplomacy, should not affect popular demands for economic and political reform and for participating in decision making through fair and free elections. Systemic discrimination against the Shiite majority, especially in employment, economic opportunity, and land ownership, is decades old and unrelated to Syria. Although the claim is dishonest, the al-Khalifa regime has expended considerable effort in public relations and lucrative business deals to promote it.

### THE QATAR DIFFERENCE

By contrast to Bahrain, Qatar has taken a different route—toward democracy, open political discourse, and the smart use of its oil wealth. I recall an encounter I had on a research visit to Qatar in the mid-1970s with Sheikh Khalifa al-Thani, the country's former ruler and the grandfather of the current emir. On a stroll by the sea, I asked him about the prospects for democracy in Qatar. He replied, "Democracy is a game, and before you play it the people of Qatar have to learn the rules." Ten years later, following the Iranian revolution and well into the Iraq-Iran war, I again visited Qatar and asked the emir the same question about democratic prospects. He answered, "Our people have yet to learn the rules."

By the mid-1990s, the emir's son, Sheikh Hamad, who deposed his father in a bloodless coup, had initiated several major steps to promote open political dialogue in the Arab world, albeit not necessarily through democracy. Creating the Al Jazeera pan-Arab television satellite channel was his crowning achievement in the use of Qatar's soft power to carve out a larger-than-life-sized influence for the small oil sheikhdom in the Arab world and globally. Almost 20 years after the establishment of Al Jazeera, Qatar in 2013 succeeded in gaining a foothold in the American media market by establishing Al Jazeera America (following the purchase of the Current TV cable channel from former US Vice President Al Gore for over \$100 million, according to media reports).

In response to the 2011 Arab upheavals, the emir of Qatar distributed billions of dollars to his people in the form of pay raises, free education,

housing grants, and all kinds of social services to convince them that their country needs no Arab Spring. Yet Qatar, through its media, continued to support Arab revolts, the fall of dictators, and democratic transitions in other Arab countries. Qatar also supported the new Islamic governments in Egypt and Tunisia, and offered them substantial economic aid. Furthermore, the Qatari emir became the main funder of the opposition movement in Syria and the struggle to topple Assad's regime. Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar has financed and armed anti-regime radical Islamic jihadists in Syria, and has played a critical role in convincing the League of Arab States to abandon Assad.

The 61-year-old Sheikh Hamad's nod to democracy in his country came early in 2013, when he relinquished his rule to his third son, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who became Qatar's new ruler. By contrast, Sheikh al-Khalifa, the Bahraini prime minister and the king's uncle, has held his (unelected) position since independence in 1971. He is currently the longest-ruling prime minister in the world.

---

*The United States retains a massive reservoir of effective soft power in the region.*

---

### ISLAMISTS IN POLITICS

Mainstream Islamic parties that are committed to peaceful dialogue and political compromise in their societies and are not bent on undermining democratic transitions could be effective players in post-autocratic politics. Egypt's MB, the Tunisian Ennahda, and Bahrain's Wifaq have promoted this image. Recently, the exiled leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood have also committed themselves to a peaceful, inclusive, and tolerant democratic transition in Syria. These parties realize that if they envision playing an active role in post-autocratic governments, they will need to compete in national and local elections, and engage politically and socially with existing and emerging political parties and centers of power, religious or secular. They certainly will not want to repeat the mistakes that Egypt's Islamists made in their first year in office.

The MB is the oldest, largest, best organized, and most disciplined Islamic political and socio-religious movement in the Arab region and the wider Muslim world. Most Sunni Islamic parties in Muslim majority and minority countries are rooted in MB ideology. The group was established in 1928 in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna, a school-

teacher. Within two decades, it had spread to other countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Al-Banna viewed Islam as a total way of life and an encompassing worldview. “Islam is the solution” (“*al-Islam hua al-hal*”) became the rallying cry of Brotherhood proselytization throughout the Islamic world.

Through its religious teachings and cultural, educational, political, and social programs, the MB has succeeded in becoming the most visible face of civic Islam in Egypt. Thanks to the MB, Islamic symbols, manifestations, and discourse have become deeply rooted in Egypt and in other Sunni majority countries. It is useful to remember that the MB was founded in a highly charged political atmosphere—an atmosphere dominated by an Egyptian national ideology that arose against Britain’s colonial influence and physical presence in the country and against the rising Zionist movement and the beginning of Jewish settlement in Palestine. The MB accused the Egyptian monarchy under King Fuad and his son King Farouk of colluding with British colonialism and of being indifferent to the Zionist project.

The MB through most of its history has been banned and persecuted in Egypt and other Arab countries. At times it cooperated with regimes, but it also engaged in violence and bloody confrontations with them. Yet it survived because of its deep roots in society and the economic, health, and social services it provides. Twenty years ago, the MB renounced violence and entered the political fray through elections. It came to power for the first time in 2011 following the demise of the Mubarak regime. But a year after the MB’s first president was elected, General Sisi and his junta removed him from office in a military coup.

Analysts agree that this was an illegal act, but also that Morsi made serious mistakes in his first year in office, displaying incompetence and intolerance. He sought to muzzle dissent and concentrate power. He excluded secularists, women, and Christians from senior positions in government. By late June 2013, massive demonstrations were calling for his removal, accusing him of attempting to replace Mubarak’s secular dictatorship with a theocratic autocracy.

The MB’s central soft power paradigm—what it does to attract followers—consists of promoting national identity, a religious narrative, social services, the legitimacy of opposition, and a lack of corruption. The Brotherhood has used these

attributes and attitudes to spread its message at home and abroad through traditional print and electronic media and through social media. The MB has proved adept at adjusting to the latest technologies in mass communication, including the internet (*ikhwanonline.com*), Facebook (*ikhwanbook*), YouTube (*ikhwantube*), and Wikipedia (*ikhwanwiki*).

Morsi’s ouster shook the MB and threw it off course. However, once it regained its footing a few days later, it began spreading the message that the military action against the president was about much more than the Brotherhood: It threatened Egypt’s popular sovereignty and constitutional legitimacy. Continuing mass protests against the military on behalf of “legitimacy” appear to reflect an effective use of soft power by the embattled organization.

Indeed, the MB has succeeded in delegitimizing the military’s narrative of equating the Brotherhood with terrorism, and is attempting to shift public attention to the military’s unlawful removal of a democratically elected president. For many Egyptians and foreign governments now, the issue is not about the MB; it is about a budding military autocracy under Sisi. The regime’s recent extension of security regulations seems to validate this argument.

## WINNERS AND LOSERS

Regional developments and regime policies since the Arab uprisings in early 2011 offer a scorecard for how states and groups have attempted to use soft power to maintain and enhance their influence domestically, regionally, and globally. In the Persian Gulf, Iran and Qatar have emerged as winners, whereas the influence of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia has not benefited from their soft power strategies.

Regional and foreign governments have not accepted the Saudi and Bahraini claims that Iran drives their domestic opposition or that peaceful acts of protest are synonymous with terrorism. Dozens of states and human rights groups across the world have condemned Bahrain’s poor human rights record. Major powers, including the United States, have urged the regime to enter into meaningful dialogue with the opposition and to stop illegal arrests of opposition leaders.

Meanwhile, the Saudi government’s insinuations that Washington’s pro-democracy stance could inadvertently alter the regional balance of power in favor of Russia have not persuaded

US policy makers to pursue a different approach in the region. Recent American-Russian activity regarding Syria's chemical weapons and a more robust US diplomatic engagement with Iran over the nuclear issue underscore the complexity of superpower strategies in the region and the shallowness of regional players' attempts to exploit apparent divisions among major powers to promote their regional, and often parochial, interests.

In the Mediterranean basin, the Egyptian military's efforts through diplomacy and public relations to garner support for its coup and campaign against the MB and other opposition groups have not proved successful. Growing numbers of Egyptians and many foreign governments have called on the military to return to the democratic transition that was under way before the coup. The MB, on the other hand, continues to mobilize the Egyptian public in the fight for "democratic legitimacy." The Brotherhood has publicly and repeatedly confirmed its commitment to peaceful protests and to a return to democratic politics. A senior MB spokesman recently even apologized for the "mistakes" the party made while in office.

And what of US soft power in the Middle East? Americans have cause to care about their nation's continued influence. To begin with, the United States has strategic interests—military, security, and commercial—and is deeply involved in the region. America is responsible, for example, for the safety and security of strategic waterways (the Suez Canal, the Bab al-Mandab, and the Strait of Hormuz). Washington, in addition, has a special relationship with Israel, and continues to push for dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

Second, regional terrorism in Yemen, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Iraq, or Syria—whether affiliated with Al Qaeda or not—and potential threats to American official and civilian personnel in the region are of major concern to US policy makers.

Third, the potential economic collapse of regional states and ensuing state failure could

wreak havoc on domestic stability and regional security, threatening US national security. Growing numbers of unemployed, alienated, angry, and potentially radicalized youth—coupled with persistent human rights violations, a corroding environment, and diminishing water, food, and energy security—compose a sure formula for more bloody sectarian and class conflicts, which the United States could not escape. America has a significant military presence in, or next to, most countries in the region, which is not likely to change over the next decade.

Despite extensive media speculation about its diminishing influence in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other Arab countries, the United States retains a massive reservoir of effective soft power in the region. Vocal Arab disagreements with the Obama administration's policies on Egypt, Syria, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot mask America's continuing deep influence in the greater Middle East. This soft power is exercised in part through educational institutions, entrepreneurial and technological initiatives, and specialized training programs in such fields as agriculture, health, housing, medicine, science, technology transfers, water, and the environment. These varied programs, funded by the US government and private nongovernmental organizations, are often run in conjunction with indigenous groups and communities.

The region's youth, academics, professionals, and even the officer class within the militaries still look to the United States for educational opportunities, specialized training, and advanced scientific research. American embassies and consulates frequently experience long lines of visa applicants who want to travel to the United States to benefit from such programs. And tens of thousands of students from the region are enrolled annually in US colleges and universities. This complex, multifaceted soft power will continue to form a critical aspect of America's engagement with the Arab world. ■

---

*Arab dictators are selling  
the world on the myth  
of Arab exceptionalism.*

---